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The Power of Place

Using Historic Structures to Teach Children about Slavery

As part of an impassioned speech delivered at the 1826 meeting of the American Colonization Society, George Washington Parke Custis declared slavery "the mightiest serpent to ever infest the earth." Custis, a wealthy planter and grandson of Martha Washington, viewed the enslavement of human beings as "the unhappy error of our forefathers." Yet Custis himself owned many slaves, and continued to hold them in bondage until his death in 1857. The construction of Custis' stately mansion, Arlington House, and the graceful lifestyle it symbolized would not have been possible without the use of slave labor. Custis' ambivalence concerning slavery reveals the moral and psychological dilemma that many 19th-century Americans, including some slaveholders, associated with slavery.

Nearly 150 years after its abolishment, slavery remains a complex and often painful subject for contemporary audiences. In 1995, a Library of Congress exhibit on plantation life which featured images of slaves so disturbed some black employees that the exhibit was cancelled. In a similar vein, 1,100 members of the Southern Heritage Coalition demanded the removal of the superintendent of Gettysburg National Military Park after he stated that slavery may have been a cause of the Civil War. Historians and educators at historic sites and museums have encountered substantial obstacles in their attempts to establish meaningful dialogues on the history of slavery and race relations in the United States. At times, adult audiences find the subject of slavery so painful that they are reluctant to engage in the very discussions that should occur in the nation's historic places.

Dialogues on slavery often prove far less emotional for young audiences, and yet children are not always targeted for inclusion in such conversations. In recent years, the interpretive staff of Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial has made a concerted effort to introduce the subject of slave life to children, who may represent the audience most ready to discuss the realities of slavery. Two of the site's educational programs have proven remarkably successful. One of the cornerstones of the "Parks as Classrooms" program for elementary grades is to educate children about slave life at Arlington. The success of these programs can be attributed to three factors: the introduction of the subject of slavery to students at an early age; the use of the physical structure of the house itself to encourage critical thinking; and the interactive component of the program which allows children to arrive at their own conclusions about slave life.

Individual educational programs have been developed for the kindergarten-to-second grade children and the third-to-fifth grade students. The program for the younger pupils consists of a guided house tour and a hands-on activity, some of which replicate tasks that the slaves performed. Both components allow students to compare and contrast the day-to-day experiences of the slave children and the Lee children. The same approach is used for the third-to-fifth graders, who are expected to draw more sophisticated conclusions about the slave/owner relationship. At the conclusion of the program, students are taken inside one of the original slave quarters so that they may contrast the physical living conditions of the Lee family to those of the slaves.

Throughout the guided tour, the physical structure of the house provides a constant reminder of the day-to-day experiences of the house slaves. As students tour the oldest wing of the house, which was primarily a work area, they must navigate low doorways, a narrow staircase, and dark passageways that demarcate the areas of the house associated with the slaves. The large open hearth and heavy cookware found in the

Sallie Norris, an Arlington slave. Her daughter, Selina Gray, served as Mrs. Lee's housekeeper. Photo courtesy Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial.

kitchen speak volumes about the difficulties slaves experienced as they prepared food. When students contrast the dark, steep stairs used by the slaves to the graceful family staircase, the polarity clearly demonstrates the social and racial hierarchy that existed inside Arlington's walls. At the conclusion of the program, the children tour one of the original slave quarters. The cold and dampness that penetrate the cramped, spartan rooms provide palpable evidence of the daily living conditions of the Arlington slaves.

After the house tour, students engage in hands-on activities that provide them with yet another opportunity to draw conclusions about slavery. The younger students replicate tasks that would have been performed by slaves, such as scrubbing clothing on a washboard and carrying and stacking wood. Engaging in such work for even a short period of time impresses upon the children the vast amount of physical labor slaves exerted on a daily basis. The third-to-fifth graders participate in activities that require a greater degree of critical thinking. Those who take part in the food preparation program are expected to draw conclusions about the division of labor that existed between the slaves and their owners in the daily preparation of meals. By participating in tasks that mimic the work carried out by slaves, students arrive at the understanding that the lifestyle Arlington House symbolizes would not have existed without the presence and labor of slaves.

Throughout the program, the children are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the nature of slavery as it existed at Arlington. The contradictions voiced by George Custis in the 19th century provide thought-provoking questions for contemporary visitors. Students are exposed to both the typically laborious nature of the Arlington slaves' existence as well as the more unusual aspects of their condition. The Custis and Lee families provided their slaves with a rudimentary education, spending money, and specialized medical care. Complex relationships between owner and slave are also examined. For her slave Selina Gray, Mary Custis Lee arranged an elaborate wedding ceremony, which was conducted by an Episcopal priest in the same room of the house in which Mrs. Lee herself had been married. As students attempt to reconcile the inherently exploitive nature of slavery with examples of humane treatment that existed at Arlington, they begin to realize that some of the questions raised during the program have no answers.

Student response to the programs has been extremely positive. Many of them express great excitement at the opportunity to learn about slave life. The power of place is critical, and for many students the highlight of their experience is the visit to the slave quarters. Their reactions to the program have included comments such as "I liked it when you showed us the slave quarters" and "I really like to see the place where the slaves lived and the kitchen where they cooked." By engaging children in dialogues about the nature of slavery at an early age, historians and educators can provide a comfortable environment in which this sensitive subject can be discussed. Ironically, the programs are directed at a youthful audience, but often provide a rewarding and educational experience for adults who visit during school tours.

Future efforts to include children in conversations about slavery and race must be given serious consideration, for such efforts will undoubtedly result in a generation of adults less ill at ease with the subject. Historic places provide a tangible link to the past, and thus offer unique educational experiences that cannot be replicated in a classroom. In their recent study, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discovered that nearly 80% of those surveyed believe museums and historic sites represent the best opportunity for Americans to learn "real" history. Historians and educators at these places must be willing to develop innovative methods to ensure an environment in which enlightenment about complicated historical issues such as slavery can occur. Reaching out to the youngest members of the audience may prove an excellent first step in the process.

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